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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the views of the New Zealand Counselling and Guidance Association regarding the need for changes in the system of selecting individuals for training as school counselors in New Zealand. A number of options are offered for improving the mechanics of selection, recommending selection criteria, and suggesting procedures for differentiating applicants on the basis of such criteria. Options for improving selection include: (1) placing practicing counselors and university training staff on existing selection panels; (2) standardizing selection procedures; and (3) selecting people for training by means of a national or regional panel. Selection criteria are based on the applicant's motivation to learn, ability to work well with colleagues, and personal qualities, such as open-mindedness and self-acceptance. Procedures for differentiating applicants consist of: (1) writing or tape-recording responses to statements by students; (2) role-playing a counseling session; (3) writing a short paper on a topic relevant to school counseling; (4) leading a student discussion group and then analyzing the performance; and (5) undergoing a series of personal interviews with selection panel members. (Author/CS)

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SELECTION OF SCHOOL COUNSELLORS IN NEW ZEALAND

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SELECTION OF SCHOOL COUNSELLORS IN NEW ZEALAND

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During the past couple of years practising counsellors and some university staff involved in training have expressed concern about the present method of selecting school counsellors. The N.Z. Department of Education itself has invited comment and suggestions on this issue from the universities involved in training.

Two national surveys undertaken for the New Zealand Counselling and Guidance Association (1974, 1976) have addressed themselves to this problem. While the results of these surveys have failed to delineate any clear preference among those sampled with regard to selection criteria or the means of selection, those who responded were clearly not in favour of retaining the system as it presently exists.

At present the selection of counsellors for secondary school positions is the responsibility of the Board of Governors of the school involved. Typically what happens is that a panel of people comprised of the Principal, the District Senior Psychologist, the District Senior Inspector and one or more members of the Board of Governors interview shortlisted applicants before making an appointment. The only official guidelines (Department of Education memorandum B69/31 dated 3 July 1969) are brief and merely suggest that applicants will be interviewed, and that as their responsibilities will be significantly different from those of classroom teachers and as the position requires applicants to have certain personal qualities and experience, the Department of Education should assume responsibility for participating in the selection process. Successful teaching was said to be a valuable experience and preparation for counselling but was not cited as a prerequisite. Thus, what happens now is that applicants for advertised positions are shortlisted without reference to any specific personal qualities, guidance or interpersonal skills, or relevant occupational experiences. Interviews and final appointments are likewise conducted and made without reference to previously agreed upon criteria. Local needs, limitations and interests presumably greatly influence the outcome of the above procedure. Curiously, two important groups with professional interests in the guidance and counselling profession are excluded from lending their knowledge and experience to the selection process, i.e., practising counsellors and university staff involved in the training of counsellors.

The NZCGA strongly endorses the view that the mechanics of selection should be altered to include the two groups now excluded and that more specific and standardized procedures and criteria should be laid down to serve as guidelines for all selecting bodies. What follows are suggestions as to how these two aims (i.e., improve the mechanics of selection and specify workable selection criteria) could be accomplished.

In regard to the mechanics of selection, a number of alternatives are possible. What follows is a brief listing of some of those possibilities.

The first option would be to leave the selection procedure as it is now. The assumptions underlying this position are that trainees are being selected by those who best know what local conditions demand and that training courses should be able to cope successfully with any students appointed. The first assumption tends to ignore the belief that school counselling is a position requiring certain personal characteristics, interpersonal skills, and attitudes that are independent of local considerations

and must thus be given prior attention. The second assumption is, at worst, incorrect, and at best, wasteful. With an excess of applications over positions available, every attempt should be made to select those already possessing some measure of the necessary skills and attributes. These candidates would begin training from an advantaged position, and, it is reasonable to assume, progress further during training than lesser-skilled apointees.

A second option would be to have 'open' admission to any university with a counsellor training programme. Individuals would apply for admission to a training programme, be selected by the university involved, undergo study at their own expense, and apply for positions as they became available after completion of the course. This option would save the Department of Education the expense of the present secondment scheme, place selection squarely in the hands of trainers, and still allow appointing authorities to match applicants to local needs. It could be argued that this scheme would exclude potentially effective people from undergoing training because of financial restrictions. While that may be true, the possibility of excluding potentially good people exists under any scheme (e.g., in practice successful teaching is considered necessary for appointment as a counsellor, yet there is no conclusive evidence to suggest teaching should be a necessary prerequisite). As long as the situation of demand exceeding supply exists, a high quality of trainees is likely. However, unless specifically included in the selection process by university trainers, practising counsellors would still be excluded from contributing their knowledge and expertise to the process of selection.

A third option would be to include practising counsellors and university training staff on selection panels as they now operate. This would add the knowledge and ideas of two important groups now excluded but would be cumbersome and expensive to put into effect. Greater regional coordination in terms of advertising counsellor positions, shortlisting, and selection interviewing would do much to minimize the problems of time and expense associated with this option.

A fourth option would be to standardize selection procedures so that each appointing school followed a more clearly defined procedure, for example, one that included a personal interview, participation in a group discussion, a written statement on some relevant topic, simulation exercises (e.g., role-play and evaluate a counselling session) and written and/or verbal responses to typical student statements. This option would at least ensure that applicants would have to demonstrate a variety of skills but it would necessitate an understanding of job requirements and effective counsellor behaviour on the part of those doing the selecting. At present the latter cannot be assumed. However, this could largely be overcome by having all appointing schools send representatives (those who will be involved in selection) to an in-service seminar on counsellor selection where some standardized procedure to be used by all appointing schools could be developed. Again, this option excludes practising counsellors and university personnel, but it would be a simple matter to include them if the seminar scheme were adopted.

A fifth option would be to have selection done centrally and annually to build up a pool of 'potential trainees' from which appointments could be made and training undertaken in the present manner. This option has the obvious benefits of standardizing selection, involving <u>all</u> interested groups, allowing local needs to be met, and does not exclude anyone because of either financial hardship or lack of teaching experience. The scheme would add to Departmental expenses but these might easily be justified by the benefits mentioned above.

A sixth option would be to select people for training secondment by means of a national or regional selection panel. Following successful completion of the first year of training, trainees could then apply for available positions. On completion of one year's satisfactory internship they would be awarded the Diploma in Education (Guidance). Those who did not successfully complete the first year could return to their previous positions with or without a Dip.Ed. and the right to apply for any advertised counsellor positions. This scheme has the advantages of including all interested parties in selection, delays appointment until training has been completed, and offers those who are not successful in a counsellors training programme the opportunity to still complete a regular Dip.Ed. and return to their former position.

With the exception of the first, any of these options or a variation/combination would seem to represent a practical alternative to the present scheme. However, because each one has its particular advantages and disadvantages, discussion among all interested parties would be necessary before implementing any new scheme.

The second aspect of the selection question involves specifying criteria for selection and actual procedures that will differentiate among applicants on those criteria. While it is recognized that there are serious difficulties in establishing reliable and valid selection criteria and procedures, the following suggestions are offered as possibilities that deserve to be discussed, tried and modified or discarded as necessary.

1. Academic potential: Because all training courses are postgraduate, a certain level of academic ability would be necessary. Each university could specify the minimum academic requirements for admission as they do at present.

2. Experience - personal and occupational: As with other 'helping' professionals, school counsellors should be people who have experienced many facets of life and occupational settings. Those selecting should not be bound by a strict interpretation of the phrase 'relevant occupational experience' but, rather, should look for some indication that an applicant's experiences demonstrate a fundamental interest in and concern for people.

3. Teaching as a prerequisite: Although teaching experience is relevant, it should not be regarded as essential. There is no body of research to support making it so.

4. Motivation to learn:

   a. Every trainee must be motivated to participate in training to the fullest. Merely tolerating it or accepting it as something-that-must-be-done does both the trainee and the profession an injustice.

   b. Every trainee must be motivated to critically examine her/his present counselling skills and to practice new, more effective ones.

   c. Every trainee must be willing to accept the training programme's orientation. This does not mean that the programme should be immune from criticism, but rather that the trainee should know and

accept beforehand the unique aspects and orientation of the programme they will be entering.

5. Evaluation by others: There should be evidence that trainees are:
   a. well liked by pupils,
   b. well accepted by colleagues,
   c. open to and accepting of others' ideas,
   d. capable of making positive contributions to groups (e.g., staff meetings).

6. Personal qualities: (Although difficult to define and specify, there may be a number of general qualities that are both relevant as selection criteria and clear enough to serve as guides or indicators for selection panels.)
   a. Effective communicator - each trainee should have basic oral and writing skills, should be capable of expressing her/his knowledge and thoughts clearly and economically, and should demonstrate effective use of everyday interpersonal communication skills (i.e., not interrupt, listen and understand accurately, and demonstrate congruence between verbal and non-verbal components of communication.)
   b. Open-minded - trainees should be flexible in their approach to new people and situations and able to accommodate ideas and beliefs different from their own. Those who seem quick to judge or evaluate people or situations are not open-minded.
   c. Non-domineering or aggressive - the ideal trainee would be one who does not seek to control and direct others. Those who talk excessively, readily interpret the communications of others and use a high number of self references ('I' statements) would not make effective counsellors.
   d. Acceptance of self - every trainee should have an objective understanding of himself which allows him to accept both his strengths and weaknesses, his successes and failures. Trainees should be emotionally stable, self-confident, and trusting. Those who are defensive, insecure, cynical and suspicious of others would not be suitable as counsellors.

There are a number of procedures that could be employed to differentiate applicants with regard to some of the above criteria:

1. Have applicants write or tape record responses to short student statements. The responses could then be rated as to helpfulness or effectiveness.
2. Have applicants record a role-played counselling session on either video or audio tape and then evaluate their performance. Emphasis for selection purposes would be not on the quality of the performance during the interview but on how openly and accurately the applicants recognized both their deficiencies and strengths.
3. Have applicants submit a short paper asking them to evaluate some topic relevant to school counselling. Judges would then rate them according to predetermined criteria.
4. Have each applicant lead a stduent discussion group and then briefly analyze his/her performance. A knowledgeable 'co-leader' could both observe the applicant in action and discuss the performance with him/her afterwards.

5. Have applicants undergo a series of personal interviews so that they do not have to face the entire selection panel (which could consist of seven or more people) simultaneously. This will make the situation less stressful to the applicants and give them more of a chance to present themselves well. Also, it will allow the selection personnel to ask more questions and compare observations from two or three interview situations rather than just one.

Taken together, the alternative schemes, the criteria, and the procedures discussed above suggest a number of specific ways that the selection can be clarified and standardized. As stated previously, the NZCGA strongly endorses the view that the mechanics of selection should be altered to include the two groups now excluded (practising counsellors and university trainers) and that this paper serve as a basic working paper for all interested parties in upgrading the method of selecting of school counsellors.